

WASHINGTON POST

9 FEB 1976

Radiation Bugs Moscow Embassy

By Peter Osnos

By a Washington Post Staff Writer

MOSCOW, Feb. 8 — The recent discovery of an abnormally high radiation level in the U.S. embassy building here and the embassy's efforts to deal with the problem caused considerable confusion this weekend — and even some alarm — in Moscow's American community.

Balancing an embassy doctor's assurances to callers that there is no cause for concern are reports emanating from a secret briefing to selected diplomats on Friday indicating that there was a radiation problem — although the situation is being rectified.

Sources said that security officers attributed the radiation to sophisticated Soviet surveillance equipment either in the embassy or focused on it. Since it is assumed here that all American apartments and offices are under intensive surveillance from the Soviets, detecting new types of equipment would ordinarily not cause much of a ripple.

But instead of simply taking steps to counter the surveillance, a decision was made — and then reversed — to advise embassy employees and their families about the situation.

The result of that unexplained turnaround was a spate of rumors that gathered strength after a Friday briefing for a small group of key personnel. One version of that session went so far as to quote Ambassador Walter J. Stoessel as suggesting to diplomats that they are free to leave Moscow if they wish to escape the hazard.

"Most of us haven't been told what is going on, and of course we are worried about it," said the wife of one diplomat. But embassy spokesmen declined

repeatedly over the weekend to issue any statement that would clarify the matter.

Other Americans who use the embassy — journalists, businessmen and students — are also concerned. Aside from offices, the sprawling embassy compound contains a nursery school, snack bar, commissary, medical dispensary, waiting rooms and clubs.

The embassy physician, Dr. David Johnson, would not discuss the radiation matter directly, but when agitated parents reached him, he said that there is no special health hazard to Americans working in, living in or regularly visiting the U.S. compound.

Another source said that shields and de-bugging devices had been installed to bring the radiation level down, but there was no confirmation on that point either.

The mystery is why the embassy has acted so clumsily. One possibility is that officials decided that general disclosure of the extent of surveillance and its potential dangers would create a Soviet-American incident at a time when detente is already under political strains in the U.S.

Another, less likely, possibility is that the radiation is being produced not by Soviet equipment but by American devices.

In any event, by moving to play down the issue the embassy has given the radiation scare a stronger push.

PAB - 89